

TOMEBOY

DiCaprio hangs loose with (from left) Patrick McGaw, James Madio, and Wahlberg and (at right) acts the part of the book's author, Jim Carroll



SHOOTING AND SC

'THE BASKETBALL DIARIES,' A FILM VERSION OF THE
MEMOIR OF JIM CARROLL, PUTS LEONARDO DICAPRIO



ORING

HOOPS-AND-HEROIN
FRONT AND CENTER

IN THE BOWELS OF A burned-out basement, a skinny kid is nodding off on a concrete step, his head lolling as if his neck were made of Jell-O. Suddenly, the door bangs open, and a prostitute stumbles in and careens over to his flaccid body. Yanking his head up by the hair, she leans into his face and, in a whiny voice, begs, “Jim-my, got any drugs?” But the kid can’t hear her; the foamy white drool hanging from his slack mouth and the glazed-over, ecstatic expression on his face show he’s halfway to heaven. ♦ “Cut! Let’s go again,” says the director, and with that, the junkie comes back to life as Leonardo DiCaprio. “At least I

BY MELINA GEROSA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TERRY RICHARDSON

have a germ-free mouth," he says, cockily squirting a stream of spit, enhanced by hydrogen peroxide, from between his front teeth. The peroxide bottle and the bright yellow boxes of baking soda (hero-in's stand-in) are among the few reminders that this grim Harlem location is actually headquarters for *The Basketball Diaries*. But if there's a watchword on the set of the gritty film drama based on Jim Carroll's heroin-laced memoirs of growing up on Manhattan's mean streets, it's *real*.

The subject matter is so dark, in fact, that the \$4.5 million film, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and opened nationally last weekend, took 17 years to jump from page to screen. "I wish I was there shooting documentary footage of Jim Carroll when he was young, because that's the closest to what I'm trying to do," says 30-year-old Scott Kalvert, a first-time feature director best known for his Marky Mark and Guns N' Roses music videos.

Whether kids are ready for scenes this "real" or not, *Diaries* features an actor they want to see: 20-year-old Leonardo DiCaprio. Although none of his films (which include *This Boy's Life*, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, and *The Quick and the Dead*) have been commercial hits, DiCaprio's chameleonic talent and waifish good looks have Hollywood heralding him as the hottest young actor in twentydom. "It's so unexpected," he says a bit uncomfortably. "Most of the time I'm working and not visible to the public, so I don't know how people react to me. I know my friends and family are going to be the same, but all the acquaintances might react differently. Who knows? It's something I'm going to have to deal with later, I suppose."

A year ago, when *Diaries* was in production near a high school in lower Manhattan, Leo fever was already epidemic. "By the end of the day, we'd have hundreds of girls looking for Leo and Marky Mark, peeking in our trailers. I would expect that for Marky, but for me it was bizarre," says DiCaprio, who hung out with the students to sabotage his own mystique. "I would ask them questions about themselves," he explains. "When they realize that you're just like anyone else, they don't care about you anymore. They're like, 'Where's Marky Mark?'"

For his part, Mark Wahlberg, the once but probably not future Marky Mark, seems like he's never met a glance he didn't like. "Hey, Shpielberg!" Wahlberg, 23, yells over to Kalvert, a slight figure in a baseball cap, who looks more like a young cast member than the man at the helm. Apparently Kalvert is treated that way, too. "I call him 'Shpielberg' because he's always like, 'Do your little shpiel,'" explains the former Calvin Klein model. "And also because there was this big thing about Spielberg never winning an Oscar [before *Schindler's List*], and I'm just like, 'Scott, you're never winning an Oscar!'"

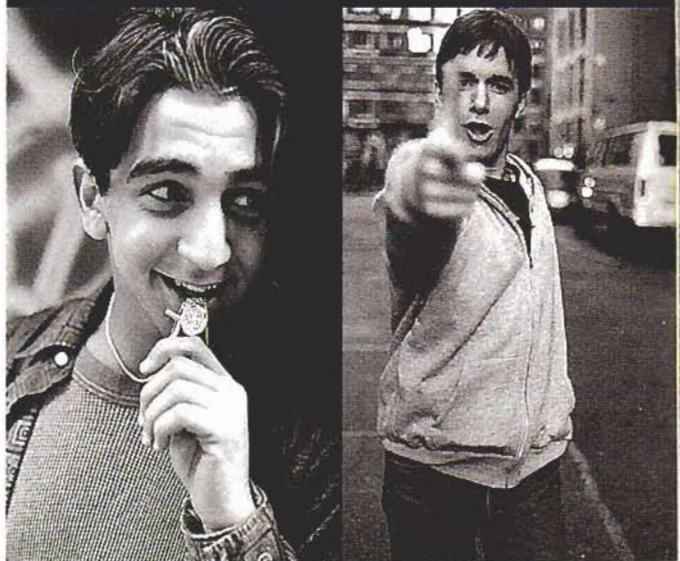
Wahlberg, who plays Jim's thug-buddy Mickey, was worried about his chemistry with DiCaprio. "He's West Coast, I'm East Coast. He's more into being an actor, I'm more about being myself—so it was weird. But the weirder thing is, we just clicked. We would go out to a club and dance or chase girls or whatever."

On-set friendships worked as a good counterbalance to shooting the book's nerve-racking scenes of drug withdrawal. "It was fun," says DiCaprio, poking at the fake purple track marks on his arm. "When Jim withdraws, he turns into an animal. I touched upon



DOCUMENTARY

FOOTAGE OF JIM CARROLL WHEN HE WAS YOUNG... THAT'S THE CLOSEST TO WHAT I'M TRYING TO DO HERE," SAYS 'DIARIES' DIRECTOR KALVERT





MUGGING

(Clockwise from above) Wahlberg, DiCaprio, and Madlo make a scene; Carroll bonds with his on-screen incarnation; McGaw takes aim; Madlo shoots a glance; Wahlberg covers up



emotions I've never tapped my *entire life*. Every time I was doing it, I was going a little further."

When it came to scenes of male hustling, Kalvert wasn't so bold: Episodes that come off as erotic in the book are distilled into one scene in which Jim prostitutes himself, teeth clenched in agony. "It's a *great scene*," says DiCaprio, getting visibly worked up. "I used the fact that I was disgusted. This guy was kissing my neck and rubbing my belly—he didn't touch *down there* at all—but it was repulsive the way he was moving me and using me. I just wanted to smack him. It's great because after you do something that terrifying, you can walk off the set and go back to the hotel and hang out with your friends, you know?"

To prepare for filming *Diaries*, DiCaprio hung out in Greenwich Village and went to a poetry reading with the man who wrote them: Jim Carroll. A pale Raggedy Andy of a guy, Carroll, 44, looks more like a vagrant than the now-clean poet who visits the set daily to provide a reality check. It's been a long road for him—and for the movie. The first casting call—back in the early '80s—was for Matt Dillon, with John Cassavetes directing. Then there was talk of Eric Stoltz, and, in 1986, of *Breakfast Club*er Anthony Michael Hall. "A lot of hardcore *Diaries* fans said, 'That's blasphemous!' because they always saw him as the nerd," recounts Carroll. "But Anthony was a real wiseass, and he could play basketball well enough." That too fell apart.

For a time, the production companies of both John Malkovich and Robert Redford were interested, although Redford didn't want the author's involvement. *Diaries'* prospects sank to a new low when Carroll heard that a bearded Rick Schroder had appeared on *The Pat Sajak Show*. "He said, 'I grew it because I want to do this part in *The Basketball Diaries*,' and I thought, 'I didn't have a beard when I was 13. Come on!'" says Carroll, rolling his eyes. In 1987, he also saw River Phoenix on MTV claiming he wanted the role. "He would have been good," says Carroll. "But I wondered if he could play basketball. He grew up with these hippie-ish parents, and I figured the only sport they ever played was Frisbee." Kalvert persuaded Island Pictures to let him direct the film. He had seen DiCaprio's work in *This Boy's Life* and set up a meeting via their mutual rep, Creative Artists Agency. A contract was soon signed.

A FEW NIGHTS LATER, the production has moved downtown for a mugging scene. A teenage girl in cutoffs Rollerblades by, furtively scanning the trailers. But inside, there's only Carroll, musing about the timing of the movie. "With this heroin being the new drug of choice, it's almost like *The China Syndrome* coming out right at the time of Three Mile Island," he says. "But it's just the media. It wasn't going away all those years. People always want to get low and slow down the pace of life," he says grimly. "I just advise them to move to a small town instead."

The addictions of the actor who is bringing Carroll's past to life appear to be more commonplace. When DiCaprio is caught snuffing out a Marlboro between takes, his expression is nothing if not deer-caught-in-the-headlights. He walks over to whisper in the ear of his publicist, who is suddenly by my side. "Do you mind not saying in the article that Leo smokes?" she asks politely. "He really doesn't want his mother to know." ♦